

The Endless Trench: Hiding for decades from the Spanish fascists

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Directed by Jon Garaño, Aitor Arregi and Jose-Mari Goenaga; written by Luiso Berdejo and Goenaga

The Endless Trench (La trinchera infinita), co-directed by Jon Garaño, Aitor Arregi and Jose-Mari Goenaga (*Flowers, The Giant*), concerns itself with a man who hides out from the Spanish fascist authorities for 30 years, from the period of the civil war in 1936 until the regime of Gen. Francisco Franco declares a political amnesty in 1969.

The film fictionally treats an actual phenomenon, the dozens or more of left-wing opponents of Franco, subsequently known as “moles,” who concealed themselves—in closets, attics, cubbyholes, behind fake walls—in their own homes for decades following the defeat of the Republican forces in 1939. In particular, *The Endless Trench* is inspired by the fate of Manuel Cortés, the former Socialist Party mayor of the southern Spanish village of Mijas, who hid in a cramped space inside his father’s house until the late 1960s.

Higinio (Antonio de la Torre) is a local government official in a small village and newly married to Rosa (Belén Cuesta) in the early days of the civil war. From the opening shots of the film, he is on the run from the vengeful Falangist fascist forces, the police and the military. Captured once, he escapes into the countryside. Shot at along with others and wounded, he makes his way back home. “If they catch me, I’m dead,” he tells his anxious wife. His name is on “the list,” i.e., those slated for detention and execution.

A fascist neighbor, Gonzalo (Vicente Vergara), whose brother has been killed, apparently by leftist forces, is in relentless pursuit, a bloodhound. He even rips down the curtains so the interior of Rosa’s house can always be observed. A plan for Higinio to make his way to Portugal goes awry. “I’ll find a way,” he says, but apparently there is no way. The couple settle into their nightmarish situation. Rosa is taken off and interrogated, but she gives nothing away. She has to report to the authorities every day and keep the front door open. Meanwhile the executions of leftists and the repression continue.

Years go by, not uneventful ones in either personal or political terms. Rosa becomes pregnant and has to leave the village at a certain point. She returns months later with a child she pretends is her nephew. In her absence, Higinio befriends two gay men who choose the supposedly empty house for a love nest.

With the end of the Second World War and the defeat of Hitler, Higinio is convinced the Allied powers will sweep the Franco regime away as well. No such event occurs. The US and its allies

learn to live quite happily with the ferociously anticommunist Spanish dictatorship. More than that, President Dwight Eisenhower comes to visit Franco’s Spain in 1959 and the leader of the “free world” expresses his delight to be making the trip.

Eventually, the radio announces an amnesty. In the face of her husband’s reluctance to venture out of the house, Rosa threatens to leave him. Finally, Higinio makes his way uncertainly, hesitantly toward the street, the unfamiliar sunlight and the outside world, for the first time in more than thirty years ...

The Endless Trench has a number of positive features. The work is made with considerable care and conscientiousness. The behavior of the characters has been thought about, and it is by and large both socially and psychologically believable.

The events in the film are shaped, both immediately and less directly, by the counterrevolutionary terror of the Franco forces, even if the three filmmakers are not entirely conscious of the fact. They are honest enough to point toward the mass repression, Spain’s White Terror, that cost as many as 400,000 lives, including tens of thousands of “disappeared” and great numbers buried in unmarked graves. One of Franco’s generals declared bluntly: “It is necessary to spread terror. We have to create the impression of mastery, eliminating without scruples or hesitation all those who do not think as we do.”

There is a valuable moment toward the end of the film. We have been led to believe that Higinio may be suffering from “paranoia” because he still thinks the regime or its defenders are looking for him. The unrelenting Gonzalo almost immediately proves him right, carrying out his most energetic search yet and very nearly succeeding. The fascist menace is always lurking in the background.

(In October 1975, during the last days of the regime, Franco addressed a rally in Madrid held to support the execution of Basque separatists and denounced “the leftist-Masonic conspiracy assisting communist subversion” of Spain.)

On the other hand, we do find out that the neighbors have long known about Higinio’s hiding out. The years of fear, isolation and concealment have a damaging, destructive influence on the lives of the husband, wife and son, Jaime (Emilio Palacios). Both Rosa and Jaime lash out at Higinio in different scenes, accusing him of “cowardice.” Jaime tells his father at one point, “Your way of fighting means nothing.” Rosa, having sacrificed everything to protect Higinio, feels trapped, desolate at certain moments. “I’m sick of it ... I can’t stand you anymore,” she exclaims.

It is hard to imagine a life—or lives—dominated by this sort of constant fear over the course of more than 30 years. It is unfair to describe Higinio as a coward; the harsh circumstances have been imposed on him, but his entire existence becomes nothing more than the daily effort to save his own skin. That has consequences, which one can read on his face, in his gestures and in his relationships.

The film leaves us with mixed feelings about the central protagonist. Perhaps its makers are themselves a little ambivalent. On the one hand, we see an unfortunate and even tragic individual who, due to his well-founded fears, is unable to mourn his father properly, take his son to school, see his son play football or have a normal relationship with his wife. On the other hand, it seems the filmmaker may be asking, “What sort of an existence is this? Was it worth living like this?”

Again, Higinio’s miserable condition is not of his making, but the fright is damaging and distorting, and it does seem to have something to do with his “moderate” political outlook, perhaps that of the Socialist Party or a liberal Republican trend. In one of the early sequences, he finds himself hiding down a well with two others also on the run. This is one of the handful of scenes in which political issues emerge. Higinio acknowledges that he “didn’t expect this [Franco’s coup].” The others point out they had warned him. He replies that the two of them—obviously more radical than he—are to blame and that “I told you things aren’t solved with guns and scaring the landlords.”

The filmmakers do not make it clear, but presumably this comment refers to the actions of Spanish peasants, who began to seize land following the victory of the Popular Front government in February 1936. The Popular Front parties themselves (the Socialist Party, Communist Party and the Republican Left in particular), as part of their historic betrayal of the Spanish Revolution, opposed such takeovers. The brief scene seems to indicate Higinio’s limited, reformist outlook and his unpreparedness for the fascist blows—for which he pays a personal price. But the issues are never explored.

Later in the film, Jaime, against his father’s wishes, introduces a young militant into Higinio’s hiding place. The latter tells the young man to forget leaflets and secret meetings and simply find “a nice girl.” We never learn what the fugitive militant is fighting for, what party he belongs to or what he is fleeing.

A scene where Higinio lectures the local postman about “the gains of the Republic,” including efforts for public health and against illiteracy, as well as land distribution measures, seems inserted rather artificially. To be honest, Higinio never expresses another remark about social questions.

In general, Garaño, Arregi and Goenaga seem to be serious and sincere artists, but—and this is typical at present—they largely abstain on the actual issues at stake in the civil war and its aftermath. Radio broadcasts effectively keep us aware of the passage of time and certain world and national events, but aside from that, the presentation never veers from the essential immediacy it establishes in the frightening, hectic opening moments. As always, one has the sense that deliberately or not the constricted character of the narrative (justified here by the intensely confined nature of the protagonist’s existence) becomes

a means of avoiding difficult, complex historical and social questions.

The present political and ideological difficulties push the filmmakers into denying, to a certain extent, what they themselves have put in the center of their film: the nature of the White Terror.

Thus, José Mari Goenaga asserted in an interview that the “film’s main theme” was the “fear of taking the first step,” a rather banal and inappropriate conception. “The film has echoes,” he continued, “of various psychological fears that people might suffer from. Fear can turn any of us into ‘moles.’ It can also be read as an allegory about the fear of coming out of the closet: the loss of freedom because of something external or internal to ourselves.”

Above all, this is the unfavorable intellectual climate speaking. On the other hand, of course, there are forces, including the Communist Party and the pseudo-left Podemos, who have a *political and social interest* in avoiding a serious examination of the Spanish Civil War. These elements, defenders of Spanish capitalism, strive consciously to cover up how it was that fascism emerged and who was responsible for its victory. This is not an academic or historical matter—they are engaged in lulling the Spanish working class to sleep about the present dangers, with the fascistic forces once more in the ascendancy.

One false position needs to be addressed, insofar as it comes into play at certain moments in *The Endless Trench*: that both sides were guilty of crimes during the Civil War and thus there is some sort of “moral equivalence” between them. This is what the Spanish bourgeoisie has been lyingly repeating for decades.

In the first place, every objective account indicates that the fascists killed human beings at an exponentially higher rate than the Republican or working-class and poor peasant forces. This is in the nature of the modern social struggle everywhere. The defenders of capitalist property and wealth have to carry out mass repression, ultimately mass murder, to protect their system.

Moreover, as Leon Trotsky once explained, using the example of the American Civil War: “The question lies not even in which of the warring camps caused or itself suffered the greatest number of victims. History has different yardsticks for the cruelty of the Northerners and the cruelty of the Southerners in the Civil War. A slaveowner who through cunning and violence shackles a slave in chains, and a slave who through cunning or violence breaks the chains—let not the contemptible eunuchs tell us that they are equals before a court of morality!”

In any event, the overriding impression left by *The Endless Trench* is that of the horror and violence of the Franco regime, and the fear it instilled in the population, and the impossibility of reconciling with or forgiving that.



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